HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN

The Wild Swans

RETOLD BY

Deborah Hautzig

ILLUSTRATED BY

Kaarina Kaila

$12.00 U.S.
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In this beloved Hans Christian Andersen tale, a young princess's devotion to her brothers gives her the strength to endure great hardship and break the evil spell that has transformed her brothers into swans.

Deborah Hautzig's moving adaptation of this tale of love, patience, and courage is beautifully illustrated by Kaarina Kaila, a 1992 Hans Christian Andersen International Award nominee. In the same spirit as their acclaimed *Thumbelina*, Deborah Hautzig and Kaarina Kaila have created a book to be treasured by fairy-tale lovers young and old.

Laude

The Wild Swans

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For Andréa Selby

—D. H.

THERE ONCE LIVED a king who had eleven sons and one daughter, whose name was Elisa. They were all so kind and spoke so beautifully that everyone knew at once they were of royal blood. When they went to school, they wrote with diamond pencils on golden tablets. At home they loved to spend their time reading elegant picture books, which had cost half the kingdom. These children had a wonderful life. But one day, everything changed.

Their father, the king, married an evil queen. The queen hated the children! She sent Elisa to live with some poor peasants in the countryside. Then the queen told the king dreadful lies about the princes, and soon the king no longer cared for his sons.

Now the queen was ready to cast a wicked spell on the princes.

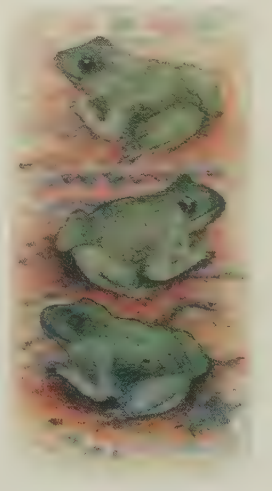
"Fly away, begone, and fend for yourselves! Fly away as voiceless birds," cursed the queen. But their fate was not quite as terrible as she wished. They became eleven beautiful wild swans. With a strange cry, they flew out of the castle and over the forest.

The swans flew over the farm where Elisa now lived. They circled the roof, trying to catch a glimpse of their dear sister, but no one heard or saw them. At last they flew away.

The days passed, one after another, and they were all alike. Poor Elisa was terribly lonely. She had no toys and no one to talk to. She missed her brothers so very much!

When Elisa was fifteen, the king asked to see her. Elisa was brought back to the palace. The evil queen took one look at the beautiful princess, and envy and hate filled her heart. She vowed to cast a spell so that the king would not recognize his own daughter!

Early the next morning, the queen crept into Elisa's marble bathroom. She had three toads with her. She kissed the first and said, "Sit on Elisa's head and make her as lazy as you are." She kissed the second, saying, "Touch Elisa's forehead and make her as ugly as you are." Then she kissed the third and said, "Rest by Elisa's heart and make her as evil as you are." She dropped the toads into the bathwater and sent for Elisa.



Elisa slipped into the water to take her bath. The toads swam to her immediately. But she was so good and innocent, their evil magic could not harm her.

When the toads touched Elisa, they were instantly transformed into three red poppies!

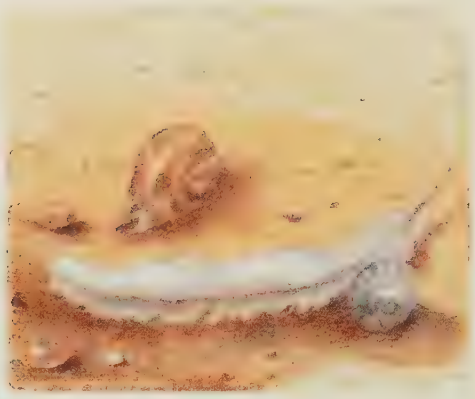
The wicked queen was furious. She took the juice from black walnut shells and smeared it all over Elisa's body and face, and threw ashes and dirt in her hair.

"No one will recognize you now!" hissed the queen.

She was right. When the king saw Elisa, he was angry. "She is not my daughter! Send her away!" he cried.

Elisa wept bitterly and ran from the castle in despair. She walked all day across fields and swamps. She didn't know where she was going—she only knew that she was deeply unhappy and longed more than ever to find her brothers.

Elisa came to a forest as night fell. She slept under a tree and dreamed of her brothers all night long.



The sun was streaming through the branches of the trees when Elisa woke up. She found a little brook and bathed in the clear water, washing away the ashes and dirt. Wild strawberries grew nearby, and Elisa gathered some for breakfast. Then she continued on her journey.

Elisa walked for miles in the forest. She had never felt so lonely in all her life. By and by, she met an old woman who was carrying a basket full of blueberries. She offered some to Elisa, who thanked her kindly.

"Have you seen eleven princes riding through the forest?" asked Elisa hopefully.

"No," the woman replied. "But I have seen eleven swans wearing gold crowns, in a stream not far from here." She took Elisa to the stream, and they said good-bye to each other.

Elisa followed the stream until it ran into the sea. The shore was covered with smooth, round pebbles. Some were made of stone, some of glass, some of iron. All were made perfectly smooth by the gentle ocean waves.

"The waves never tire of polishing these pebbles," said Elisa. "I must learn to be as patient as the waves in my search for my brothers."

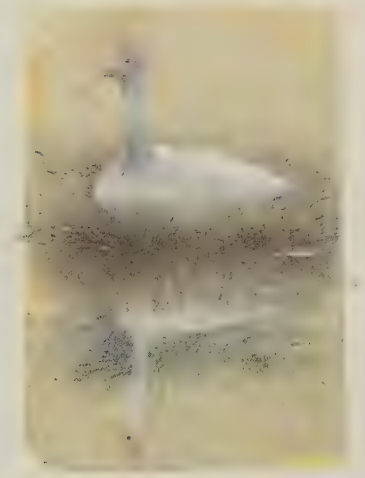
Just then Elisa noticed eleven swan feathers lying on the beach. Each had a teardrop clinging to it. Where did the feathers come from? And whose tears had fallen on them? Elisa did not know. She sat on the beach and gazed at the ocean, wondering.

When the sun began to set, Elisa saw eleven wild swans wearing gold crowns, flying toward the beach. Elisa ran and hid behind a tree. The swans landed nearby, flapping their great white wings.

The moment the sun disappeared beyond the horizon, the swans turned into eleven handsome princes. They were Elisa's brothers! Elisa wept with joy and ran into their arms.

They were as happy to see her as she was to see them. They laughed, and cried, and told each other of the evil things the wicked queen had done to them.

"As long as the sun is out, we are wild swans," explained the oldest brother. "Only at night do we regain our human shape. That is why we must never be flying at sunset. We would fall from the sky like any other human beings—and be killed!"



"Tomorrow we must return to our new homeland, which is far across the sea. There is only one little rock rising from the sea where we can rest for the night during the long trip. We can visit our native land but once every summer, when the days are very long. We stay here eleven days, to see our father's castle and to circle over the churchyard where our mother is buried. And now we have found you, our little sister. We miss you so much—you must come with us!"

"Oh, I would love to come with you!" cried Elisa. "But how? We do not have a ship or a boat, and I cannot fly."

The brothers had a plan. They worked all night weaving a net of reeds and willow branches. Just before sunrise, Elisa lay down upon it and fell asleep.

When the sun came up, the princes changed into swans again. They picked up the net with their bills and flew up into the clouds with their sleeping sister.

When Elisa woke up, she thought she was still dreaming. How strange and wonderful it felt to fly through the air! Her youngest brother had put berries in the net for Elisa to eat, and he flew above her to shade her from the hot sun.

All day long they flew. But they flew more slowly because they were carrying Elisa. They beat their wings as swiftly as they could. They had to get to the rock before sunset, or they would fall from the sky and drown!

The rim of the sinking sun touched the sea, and Elisa trembled with fear. Suddenly the swans dove down, and in the distance Elisa saw the little rock, surrounded by water.

Just as the sun vanished, they landed on the rock. Elisa's brothers clustered near her. The rock was so tiny, they had to stand clinging to each other all night long.

At dawn the brothers became swans again. They carried Elisa and flew all day until they arrived at their new homeland. It was a beautiful country, covered with green fields and forests and mountains. The brothers took Elisa to a safe little cave to rest. The walls were covered with vines and other plants.

"Tomorrow you must tell us what you have dreamed," said her youngest brother.

"I hope I will dream how I can break the spell the evil queen has cast!" said Elisa. She hoped and wished and prayed until at last she fell asleep.

In Elisa's dream, a beautiful fairy came to her.

"The spell on your brothers can be broken," said the fairy.

"How?" asked Elisa.

"Listen carefully: The ocean waves are softer than your hands, yet they can turn rough, hard stones and glass into smooth pebbles. You can save your brothers if you have the same patience and courage. Now look at the prickly nettle I hold in my hand! They grow all over the land. You must pick them, even though they will blister and burn your soft hands. You must stamp on them with your bare feet until the nettles become like flax. From that you must twine thread and knit eleven shirts with long sleeves. If you cast one shirt over each swan, the spell will be broken!"

Then the fairy said, "Remember this: From the moment you start until you finish, you must be silent and never speak to anyone. If you speak one word—just one word—your brothers will die. Their lives depend on you!"

The fairy touched Elisa's hand with the nettle. It felt like fire and woke Elisa from her dream. She set off immediately to begin her task.

Elisa picked the prickly nettles. Big blisters rose on her hands and arms. But she did not mind the pain as long as she knew that she could save her brothers. She broke each nettle and stamped on it with her bare feet until it became as fine as flax. Then she twined it into green thread.

When the sun set, Elisa's brothers returned.

"What did you dream last night?" asked the youngest brother.

Elisa did not dare answer. She did not say one word.

"What is the matter, Elisa? Tell us," he pleaded.

Still she said nothing.

"Why won't she speak?" cried the oldest brother. "Has a spell been cast on her, too?"

Then the brothers saw Elisa's hands, and they understood she was working for their sake. The youngest brother cried and cried, and when his tears fell on Elisa's hands, the blisters disappeared.

Elisa worked all night and all the next day. By sunset, the first nettle shirt was done.

The next day, Elisa was gathering more nettles when she heard the blare of hunters' horns coming from the mountains. The sounds came nearer and nearer, and Elisa hid in her cave behind the pile of nettles.

The hunters' dogs found Elisa first, and the hunters soon followed. The handsomest hunter was the king of the country. And he had never seen a girl lovelier than Elisa.

"Why are you hiding, beautiful child?" asked the king.

But Elisa did not dare speak, because her brothers' lives depended on her silence. She hid her blistered hands behind her back.

"You cannot stay here," said the king. "Come with me. If you are as kind as you are beautiful, you will wear velvet and silk, and a gold crown on your head, and my castle will be your home."

The king lifted Elisa onto his horse. She cried bitterly, but the confused king would not set her down again. "I only want to make you happy," the king said earnestly. "Someday, I vow, you will be!"

The king and his men galloped home to the royal city. The king led Elisa into his castle, which was filled with marble fountains and beautiful paintings. But Elisa did not see any of it—she thought only of her brothers, and she wept.

Elisa was given a regal gown to wear. She was so beautiful that the royal court bowed and curtsied when they saw her. The king announced that Elisa would become his queen. Everyone was joyful—everyone except the archbishop.

"She is a witch!" whispered the archbishop. "She has cast a spell over you!"

But the king did not listen, and the marriage ceremony was held.

The king gave Elisa a chamber with costly green carpets and tapestries on the walls. It looked like the cave where she had been with her brothers. In the corner was her green thread and the nettle shirts she had knitted.

"Here is the work you did before we met," the king said gently. "Perhaps it will amuse you to see it."

Elisa could not say one word, but her eyes spoke silently of her love for the king. He tried so hard to please her! She wanted so much to tell him everything—but she had to be silent until all the shirts were made.

Every night, while the king slept, Elisa went into her chamber to make the nettle shirts. But when she finished the sixth one, she had no thread left! What was she going to do?

Elisa knew that nettles grew in the churchyard nearby, so she crept out of the castle and ran through the dark, empty streets. The churchyard was full of ghosts and monsters, but Elisa refused to be afraid. Her brothers were depending on her. She immediately began picking nettles.

Only one person had seen Elisa leave the castle—the archbishop. He had followed her there.

"I was right," murmured the archbishop. "Here she is in a graveyard filled with ghosts, and she shows no fear. She must be a witch!"

The king was heartbroken when the archbishop told him what he had seen. He didn't want to believe it. But when Elisa went out to pick nettles for the last shirt, the archbishop and the king followed her. The king saw Elisa picking nettles, surrounded by demons, and he was horrified.

"Let the people judge her," said the king sadly.

The people judged her guilty and said she must be killed.

Elisa was thrown into a dungeon. It was cold and damp, and there was nothing there except the nettles she had picked and the shirts she had knitted.

"This is your last night on earth!" said the archbishop. He slammed shut the door.

Elisa worked feverishly all night. She had to make the eleventh shirt before morning! The mice in the dungeon wanted to help. They ran across the floor fetching nettles for her. Birds sang outside the iron bars of the window to give her courage.

One hour before sunrise, Elisa's brothers arrived at the castle. They begged and begged to see the king. Finally the king came, but just then the sun rose. The brothers were gone. High above the castle flew eleven swans.

Everyone in the city gathered in the town square. They all wanted to see the witch being burned.

Elisa was taken from the dungeon and thrown into a horse-drawn cart. She was still knitting the eleventh shirt, and the other ten lay at her feet.

"Look at the witch!" screamed the people as Elisa's cart came along. They rushed to stop the cart and tear the knitting out of her hands.

But at that moment, eleven white swans flew down and surrounded Elisa. They beat the air with their strong wings, and the people backed away in fear.

Quick as a flash, Elisa grabbed the eleven shirts and cast them over the swans. Instantly, there stood eleven handsome princes! But the youngest one had a swan's wing instead of an arm, for Elisa had not been able to finish the last shirt.

"Now I can speak!" cried Elisa. "I am innocent!"

The people knew a miracle had taken place, and they fell to their knees.

"Yes, she is innocent!" cried the oldest brother. He told the king all that had happened to himself, and his brothers, and their brave sister, Elisa.

While the prince spoke, an amazing thing happened. A million roses appeared, surrounding Elisa. On the top bloomed a single white rose, shining like a star.

Elisa had saved her brothers' lives—and her own as well. Bells rang throughout the city, and there was a huge celebration. The king lifted Elisa onto his horse, and they rode off to the castle. Elisa was happier than she had ever been in all her life.

HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN's fairy tales have enchanted generations of young readers worldwide. Born in Odense, Denmark, in 1805, he died in 1875.

DEBORAH HAUTZIG, author of many popular children's books and two award-winning young adult novels, *Hey, Dollface* and *Second Star to the Right*, has adapted two other Hans Christian Andersen tales, *Thumbelina* and *The Little Fir Tree*. She lives in New York City.

KAARINA KAILA's dreamlike watercolor illustrations have graced many fairy-tale books and won her international acclaim. She was nominated for the 1992 Hans Christian Andersen International Award for illustration. She lives in Helsinki, Finland.

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